Symbolism in Louise Erdrich’s Tracks

*Tracks*, by Louise Erdrich, is a novel about a tribe that lives near a lake, that is beginning to feel the influence of colonization. The novel follows some of the families and their struggle to conform and hold onto their culture. It is full of symbols that take on a greater meaning than their original definitions. Symbolism plays a big role in this novel, by giving deeper meaning to characters, displaying emotion, and representing death. The most notable symbols in this novel are: the bear and his association with the Pillager clan, hair as a symbol of respect, and water as a physical representation of death. These symbols give deeper meaning to the text, and they allow the reader to explore further into the culture that is laid out before them.

The symbol of the bear is a large part of the novel. The reader sees images of the bear throughout the novel. The bear is most notably associated with the Pillager family; especially Fleur. The connection is first established at the very beginning, after Nanapush has rescued Fleur from her family’s cabin. He has returned to the cabin to give her family a proper burial. He uses their family symbol to mark each one of their graves. “I scratched out their clan markers, four crosshatched bears and a marten,” (Erdrich 5) The Pillager land is out in the woods and is slightly isolated. Their living style is very similar to that of a bear; one can assume that is where the origin of this family symbol came from. The bear is an extremely powerful creature, and because the Pillager family is associated with this, the reader is already associating Fleur with power. Fleur was one of the two, of her family members to survive, and it is clear that she is one of the most powerful members of the clan. From the beginning of the novel, the symbol of the bear
has been associated with Fleur and the Pillager clan; the reader knows from this association that Fleur will be a powerful force.

The first description the reader gets of Fleur, other than from Nanapush, is from Pauline. Pauline’s description of Fleur is very animalistic; in this first passage she suggests to the reader that Fleur is changing into an animal to hunt at night. “we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt.” (Erdrich 12) The description of these tracks seems very similar to that of a bear. It has already been stated in the novel that the people believe that Fleur has some sort of magical connection. Since her family has already been associated with the bear, it was a logical connection for the people to believe that this is the animal she was changing into. Besides this logical connection, Fleur has taken on many characteristics of a bear. Many people fear Fleur, and her land is avoided when possible, just like people fear and avoid a bear. “People went there although they didn’t want to meet the dead or the living, Fleur especially,” (Erdrich 35). The people in this area did not want to cross Fleur, because of all of the rumors and stories they had heard about her. The people still needed to go to her property to hunt, but they were very careful not to get too close, as if she was a bear. It is also mentioned in Fleur’s description, that she has a “chuffing cough, the bear cough” (Erdrich 12). Almost every movement Fleur makes can be paralleled with that of a bear. Many of the people around her fear her powerful connection with the bear. Fleur continuously displays bear like qualities throughout the rest of the novel.

One of the most notable associations of the bear with Fleur is during the birth of Lulu. A bear enters the house as she is giving birth. Nanapush remarks that it may have
come because it heard Fleur’s call. This suggests an even stronger connection of Fleur and the bear than originally suspected. When Fleur needed aid, in her time of need, a spirit bear appeared and relieved her of the pain. Fleur had been having a difficult labor; she had been there for two days by the time the bear came. The bear did not harm her as it entered the room, but helped her have the baby. “So I know that when Fleur saw the bear in the house she was filled with such fear and power that she raised herself on the mound of blankets and gave birth.” (Erdrich 60) As Nanapush suggests, the arrival of the spirit bear gave Fleur the necessary strength to deliver Lulu. Like the bear, Fleur lives very close to nature; her way of life was not disturbed until colonization occurred. Fleur lost her land and her family because of colonization. At the beginning of the story of Lulu’s birth, Nanapush says, “You were born on the day we shot the last bear, drunk on the reservation.” (Erdrich 58) This bear was the last of its kind and was destroyed by tools brought by the white man, like Fleur. The bear got drunk before it was shot by a gun, both wine and firearms where brought over by colonization. The bear’s downfall, made by the white man’s tools, is foreshadowing what is to happen with Fleur. Since the bear is a symbol of the Pillager family, it is no accident that it appeared at Lulu’s birth. Lulu is the last of the Pillagers, so she also has a strong connection with the bear. However, this is the last bear, which may also be foreshadowing the loss of Lulu’s culture. Her birth marks the end of the bears and perhaps the end of the Pillagers.

Another important symbol in the novel is the characters hair. Hair is extremely important to them; it shows their age, their power and their culture. In each character’s description, their hair is included. The most memorable section of the novel associated with hair is the brutal removal of Margaret’s. Nanapush and Margaret were attacked as
they came home from church. They were tied up and they took away something that
Margaret was very proud of; her hair. As they removed her hair, she lost a piece of
herself. “For Lazarre had sliced Margaret’s braid clean off and now he was shaving the
rest of her scalp.” (Erdrich 115) It is later remarked that her hair had never been cut. Her
hair was a visual representation of her age, her power and that she demanded respect.
However, she was completely stripped of respect and power by Lazarre. During the
attack, Margaret’s braids were used to silence Nanapush. It greatly shamed him that he
was unable to help her in her time of need. The removal a Margaret’s hair not only took
away some of her respect, but also Nanapush’s respect as a man. The loss of her hair
shamed her tremendously; Lazarre had taken something she could not get back. After the
incident, she was relieved to find out that Nanapush had picked up her braids before they
escaped. She treasured and stored them in a box, and was later buried with them; this was
her way of holding on to some of the respect that Lazarre had taken away from her. In a
small way, this also helped restore some of Nanapush’s masculinity. He was not able to
protect her, but he was able to give her back some of what she had lost. Although it was
Lazarre’s intent to shame Margaret and her family, it brought them closer together. It was
not until the loss of Margaret’s hair, that Nanapush became attracted to her. “Maybe it
was the strangeness that attracted me. She looked forbidding, but the absence of hair also
set off her eyes, so black and full of lights. She did not look in the least bit pitiful.”
(Erdrich 118) After the tragedy, there was pain and shame, but this did not hold Margaret
back. She owned her new circumstances and earned back the respect that she had lost.
Her bald head was no longer a symbol of shame, but one of power.
Fleur’s hair was also a sign of power and beauty. Her hair was long and beautiful, as Pauline describes at the beginning of the novel “Her glossy braids were like the tails of animals, and swung against her when she moved,” (Erdrich 18). Her hair is clearly a large part of her physical appearance. After hearing about Margaret’s’ tragedy (her mother-in-law); Fleur removes her hair. Since her hair was so long and beautiful, it was very noticeable that it was missing. This time hair takes on a different role; one of mourning. Fleur is showing her mother-in-law the respect she has for her. Fleur removing her own hair, helped return some of the respect Margaret had just lost. This gesture also helped remove some of Margaret’s humiliation; she was no longer the only woman who had no hair. “Margaret, you, and I watched, did not say a word to make Fleur stop as she cut her braids off, shaved her own head clean,” (Erdrich 117). The removal of her braids shows the compassion Fleur had towards Margaret. This was Fleur’s way of standing by Margaret through her hard time. Fleur’s removal of her hair did not only show her grief and respect, but also severed as a warning to those who attacked Margaret. This was a very outward expression, letting them know that she knew what they did, and that they would be punished. “Though it was cold she left her head bare so everyone could see the frigid glare off her skull.” (Erdrich 119) Fleur did not often visit town, but on this occasion she walked around making sure those responsible saw. These men ran in fear of her and her newly bare head, because they knew what was in store for them. Fleur would took her revenge; the hair was a warning of what was to come.

The subject of hair comes up again at the very end of the novel, when Nanapush is describing Lulu’s return back to him from the white school. “Your braids were cut,
your hair in a thick ragged bowl.” (Erdrich 226) Lulu had changed while she was away; she now fit better into the white society. She came back looking so different, that he feared that her hair was not all that they took while she was away. He is suggesting that the whites tried to change her and take away her culture that Nanapush held so dear; her hair was a physical representation of this. In this section of the novel, hair is symbolizing their culture, which is beginning to die out. It was traditional in Native American cultures for women and sometimes men to have long hair. When children were sent away to live with white people, they usually came back with short hair and had forgotten a lot of their past. Nanapush fears that is what happened to her, while she was away. Nanapush is telling Lulu the story of her and her families past, in hopes of returning some of that culture that may have been lost during her time away. He hopes that they only changed her physical appearance and that her culture remained intact.

There are many references to water throughout this novel, whether it is the lake or drinking water, it is clearly important. Although the people fear the lake and what may lie beneath its waters, it is the source of their food during the time when hunting is not enough. In this capacity, the lake and the water are a life source for these people. The lake and the water also take on a much darker symbol, such as death. In the novel, when death is near, it is often described as water. In the very beginning of the novel, the spirits of the Pillager clan follow Nanapush home and entrap Fleur and himself with their names. Nanapush describes the sensation, “We were filled with the water of the drowned, cold and black airless water that lapped against the seal of our tongues or leaked slowly from the corners of our eyes.” (Erdrich 6) The names of those who passed, trapped them with this “invisible sickness”, and the two may have died themselves. Here, water is
clearly associated with death and the coming of death. Nanapush and Fleur barely escape death that filled them like water. Water shows up again in the novel, in the form of death, while Pauline is taking care of Mary Pepewas on her deathbed. Pauline described Mary’s death, “She let it fill her like dark water and then, a narrow-bottomed boat tied to shore, she began to pull away.” (Erdrich 67) Water, again is used to describe death and how it fills a person up and takes them away. In this area, water and death go hand in hand; they fear and depend on it. There is nothing anyone can do to stop the power of death or water in this novel.

In the first description of the lake monster, the reader hears of the deaths of three men that the monster caused. The lake monster wanted Fleur and anyone who stood in his way by saving her from drowning; they seemed to die quickly thereafter. The people in that area feared the lake and they only crossed it when it was absolutely necessary. The reader can see the fear Margaret has, when she and Nanapush cross the lake. “‘If he wants me’—she was talking about the lake man but, out of caution, using no names—‘I’ll give him good as I get’” (Erdrich 50). Although she fears the lake monster, nothing can stop her from crossing the lake to get to her son. Normally, when one thinks of a lake they think of water and a food source, but to the Chippewa people the lake and the lake monster are associated with death by drowning. The author is using this connection between water and death to better describe a situation we know so little about.

Water is again associated with death during the murder of Napoleon by Pauline. During Pauline’s mental breakdown, she goes to the lake, awaiting a battle with the lake monster. Napoleon approaches her and she mistakes him for the monster and kills him. “‘Show yourself!’ I challenged. And he did, having crawled from the water to confront
me in that place. He reared, dropped a blanket set with mud.” (Erdrich 201) The lake has become the scene of another death of the native people, adding to the notion that the waters bring death. After learning about the loss of her families land, the lake almost becomes the scene of Fleur’s death, when she attempts suicide. Fleur tried to use this common source of death, to take away her pain. She fills her pockets with rocks and steps into its depths, but Eli rescues her. “Eli dragged Fleur to land. I helped him roll her over on the bank, drowned, and gray” (Erdrich 213) Although water has brought death to many surrounding her, it would not let Fleur die. Fleur had almost died from drowning three times in this novel, but death and water was not ready to take her yet.

Louise Erdrich’s use of symbolism, in her novel Tracks, helps the reader gain a deeper understanding of the culture she is attempting to portray. Her use of the bear, in association with the Pillager family, foreshadows their demise and helps the reader better understand the Pillager characters. This novel would be lacking without the use of this symbol. The symbol of hair helps the reader better understand the character’s emotions and power. By highlighting this physical appearance, Erdrich is able to show the reader the importance of respect and power in this culture, without directly stating it. Also, her use of water as a representation of death is very unique and prevailing. Water is not typically associated with death; which causes the reader to better understand death itself with this strange parallel. Without these symbols, the reader of this novel would not have had an easy time understanding this culture.